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ABSTRACT

Crucial issues facing the departments of English in the 1960's prompt a reexamination of literature-oriented curriculums, staff preparation, enrollment trends, and international needs in the teaching of English. The implications of a shortage of qualified beginning instructors with a Ph.D. in literature suggest that teachers be trained in the basic art of teaching fundamental language skills at the college level. (RL)

1962 CURRENT ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION:: HIGHER EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF REVOLUTIONS

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WHILE ENGLISH DEPARTMENTS have in the past tended to think of themselves as justified chiefly by their advanced courses in literature, the general public, the student body, and sometimes, I expect, the administration have thought of them as chiefly justified by their service courses in composition and general literature. Nearly three quarters of their classes are of this sort, and as many as 95 per cent of their students may be nonmajors electing English mainly to improve their literacy. Such training in the elementary skills of reading and writing on the college level is a phenomenon that exists in no system but our own. In other countries, students who cannot read and write have no hope of entering the university. But the mandate to our educational system has been to transform our society by educating every individual as well as possible for as long as he is willing to subject himself to the process. As a result, we accept nearly all comers, and provide remedial work for those who need it (at least in English) on every level. This is a hideously expensive process. Up to now, we have been able to afford it because relatively few students volunteered to subject themselves to the final, most expensive, stage. Enough devoted teachers and graduate students have been found each year to take on the incoming horde, read its compositions, and spend countless hours in conference over them. In the 1085 academic institutions included in the 1961 NEA Research Report on *Teacher Supply and Demand in Universities, Colleges, and Junior Colleges,* there were more than two and a half million full- and part-time students of whom we may imagine at least one third were freshmen or were receiving some sort of remedial help in English. If each of these 880,000 had an hour of individual conference each semester (most would have had a good many more), more than a million and a half hours were spent in conference over college compositions last year: or 844 years of five-day work weeks. Even in the past, it has required many more teachers for freshman composition than could ever be absorbed into advanced courses. As long as many of the surplus English instructors could look forward to becoming assistant deans, and some of them thence to becoming deans or college presidents, the prospect for the young English instructor, although dreary by comparison with his colleague in, say, physics or economics, was not hopeless.

But we now face a new situation. On the one hand, we cannot get the instructors we need to teach freshman composition; on the other hand, if we could get them, we could not offer them futures in the profession, not even if we were promised all the assistant deanships for the next ten years.

The figures in the NEA Report just mentioned made disturbing reading in yet another way. Between 1953-54 and 1960-61, the per cent of college English teachers beginning full-time teaching with doctors degrees fell from 29 per cent to 13.6 per cent, or from about one in three to one in eight. Mathematics, foreign languages, and psychology, the subjects which suffered comparable drops, are still considerably ahead of English in beginning doctorates, from 21.3 per cent in foreign languages to 51.9 per cent in psychology. The drop of doctorates in college English is matched, of course, by the vigorous push on the part of public schools to make a master's degree or fifth year required for permanent certification to teach high school English. So we are meeting in the middle. Seven out of eight new college teachers of English last year really had the proper training to be high school teachers. Barring a miracle—in the form of a really adequate federal education appropriation—the production of Ph.D.'s in English is likely to fall even further behind the booming enrollment increase.

The solution is logically, and obviously, that the composition and general literature job is going to have to be done in high school. But we are not going to get away with simply passing the buck. That time is past; the situation is too critical. If high school English teachers are to be prepared to do a job which they have never managed to do before, we in college are going to have to address ourselves to a task which we have shrugged off for 50 years; that is, to giving prospective teachers a sufficiently rigorous training in English so that they can go beyond simple *literacy* and *correctness* to teach *effectiveness* in writing and *subtlety* in literary analysis. This doesn't mean simply more hours of English and fewer of education (that old straw man). It means making the English hours count, putting our best talent into them, somehow instilling in a large group of students without any particular scholarly interests the same standards and skills that we have in the past expected only of the few who were going into college teaching. Furthermore, college teachers can no longer afford simply to turn their charges out into the world. We must take up the cudgel for public school working conditions, for there is a real problem with high school English. We must worry with high school teachers about their class size, their textbooks, and the levels of achievement of their students. No longer can we toss the burden of maintaining contact with the high schools to an overworked colleague in the school of education, upon whom we look down professionally.

But making teacher training and the high school curriculum a major concern is only part of the job that is thrusting itself upon us. We will not much longer be able to ignore the demand for teachers of English as a second language. The activities of the Peace Corps have dramatized the problem, but from nearly every American embassy and consulate in the world the cry is coming in for teachers of English. Whole school systems in Africa and Asia are proposing to introduce English into their curricula. These demands cannot be met by simply sending over alert young Americans who do not themselves speak a foreign language to teach English to people often nearly illiterate in their own languages.

Methods and materials developed over the last 20 years have made the teaching of English as a second language a highly technical skill. At its annual meeting last December, the Modern Language Association of America passed a resolution recommending that this be recognized as a separate field of specialization within the discipline of English. But as yet there are not half a dozen departments in the country with staff or curriculum to train such specialists.

These, then, are some of the perspectives in the teaching of English. We have already been jarred out of our complacent concentration on the literary history of English. We would like to think that by revising our curricula a little to take more account of American literature, world literature, and literary criticism, we could go on pretty much as we have in the past. But we find ourselves unable to secure competent staff and on the point of being overwhelmed by a deluge of students. And pressing in upon us are the increasingly insistent international demands. Faced with the prospect of spending hours working with the high schools, and with more and more students with dark skins and strange accents who want not the latest interpretation of T. S. Eliot, but some rule that will tell them when to use *the* before a noun and when not to—faced with such prospects many an English professor in the next ten years is going to march resolutely back to the stacks, looking neither to right nor left, whistling, "aprês moi le déluge." And many an English department is going to continue to devote its curriculum almost exclusively to literary history and criticism in the firm conviction that by so doing it is best serving the "humanities." Others will try to shoulder the burden—perhaps only to collapse under it. It is going to be fascinating to see how the crisis develops. What will happen if English departments do not choose to take up the new burdens? We may be sure that the universities and the Peace Corps are not going to shut up shop simply because English departments will not play ball. On the other hand, what will English departments and the English curriculum look like in 10 years if they do shoulder the burden? Will there be any time and place for the reading, writing, and contemplating that have been the real rewards of academic life in the past?

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